

Endorsing Mr. Gorbachev

GEORGE BUSH gave Mikhail Gorbachev a remarkable political endorsement yesterday. He said he hopes the Soviet leader survives his travails and "stays strong," observing that it's in the American interest that perestroika succeed and go forward. He declined an opportunity to criticize Mr. Gorbachev for going too far in his military intervention in Soviet Azerbaijan, and, characterizing events in the Baltics as "internal problems," saluted him for sticking there to the road of peaceful change.

Calling the Baltic drive for independence an "internal problem" tends to undercut the historical American position in defense of the sovereignty of these territories, and at least by implication to sanction a crackdown or a Moscow-enforced political solution, if it comes to that. The president would have done better not to have taken his statement of sympathy and support for the besieged Mr. Gorbachev to this particular unnecessary length.

Otherwise, his statement was true, welcome and valuable and confirms a considerable intellectual passage by the president, who started out his term asking publicly whether Mikhail Gorbachev was a serious figure. Ironically, now that he has decided he is, Mr. Gorbachev is in the kind of heavy political traffic that makes almost every-

one wonder whether he can reach the goals whose setting and pursuit were what made people decide to take him seriously. If he fails or is slowed, the United States will have to make adjustments. But meanwhile Mr. Gorbachev has shown he is a figure whose progress is in the American interest. Although his domestic program is in many respects confused and bemired, he plainly means to take his country in a direction that would be more congenial and less menacing to the West. In the international realm he has set in motion changes that have visibly shrunk objectionable elements of the old Soviet policy—expansionism, subversion, military threat and ideological competitiveness.

At this point in Moscow's ordeal, there are a few, but only a few, positive things the West can do. George Bush is doing them: affirming his confidence in the Gorbachev leadership, avoiding taking advantage of the Soviet distraction and, internationally, attempting to transform changes in atmosphere into changes in structure. But there is no fix, quick or slow, that anyone else could give to a society that is caught up in the business of confronting seven decades' accumulation of profound error. As Mr. Gorbachev's difficulties at home multiply, it becomes more evident that the fate of his experiment in renewal is in Soviet hands.